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President: Mr. Gurirab . . . . . (Namibia)

The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

Agenda item 44

Question of Palestine

Report of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (A/54/35)

Report of the Secretary-General (A/54/457)

Draft resolutions (A/54/L.42, A/54/L.43, A/54/L.44, A/54/L.45)

The President: I first give the floor to Mr. Ibra Deguene Ka of Senegal, in his capacity as Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, who will introduce draft resolutions A/54/L.42, A/54/L.43, A/54/L.44 and A/54/L.45 in the course of his statement.

Mr. Ka (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (*spoke in French*): I am honoured to speak in this annual debate in the General Assembly on the question of Palestine in my capacity as Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

Allow me to take this opportunity to congratulate you once again, Mr. President, on your able stewardship of our work during this session. We are indeed fortunate that you are at the helm of this year's session, and we are certain you will guide our debates in the most productive and efficient manner possible. On behalf of the members and observers of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, I wish to express appreciation for your active support of its activities, not only because your country is a member, but also because of your keen personal interest in the Committee's discharge of the mandate entrusted to it by the Assembly.

Your personal involvement in the recent United Nations African Meeting in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, held in Namibia this year under the auspices of the Committee, has been especially helpful in ensuring the success of this important regional event crowned by the Windhoek Declaration of support to the Palestinian people.

I also take this opportunity to request you, Mr. President, to convey to Namibia's President Sam Nujoma and Prime Minister Hage Geingob our profound thanks for taking the time to meet with the Committee delegation in Windhoek and for their personal support for and encouragement of the delegation of the Committee.

The international community's position is that the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East cannot be

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resolved peacefully without a just solution to the question of Palestine, providing for the full exercise of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. The question of Palestine remains the core issue of the conflict in the Middle East.

The Committee welcomes the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum, which revived the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations and ended a lengthy deadlock that had jeopardized the peace process launched in 1993. That interim agreement brought about encouraging changes, including the redeployment of Israeli forces from parts of the West Bank; the release of 350 Palestinian detainees; agreement on safe passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; the beginning of construction work on the Gaza sea port; and agreements on some issues relating to the city of Hebron and security issues. The Committee also welcomed the resumption of the permanent status negotiations. We earnestly hope that the parties will be able to conclude the framework agreement and the final settlement agreement in strict compliance with the ambitious timetable they have set.

These positive signals give us reason to believe that the current negotiations are off to a good start and to be reasonably optimistic that progress will continue. We should, however, be mindful of the fact that these are but preliminary steps in a long, arduous process leading towards the attainment of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. The remaining issues to be tackled by the parties are immense in scope, complex and delicate, and at the present stage the international community should provide more support for these negotiations.

Despite positive signs and the progress made in the peace process, the construction and expansion of settlements is continuing, in flagrant contradiction of the statements of the Israeli authorities that no settlement would be built or extended. In the past year, a relatively new trend in settlement activities started to emerge, with the construction of hilltop settlements throughout the West Bank. Our Committee noted the recent evacuation of some of these settlements, but it wishes to reaffirm firmly and unequivocally its position of principle that all the settlements on Palestinian land are illegal and must be dismantled. They jeopardize the peace process and predetermine the outcome of the permanent status negotiations. These settlements are the symbols of continuing occupation.

Today, the map of the West Bank and East Jerusalem is dotted with settlements alongside Palestinian villages and towns, in a collage of disparate communities. Palestinians live in communities surrounded by settlement blocks and a network of bypass roads that limit their capacity for economic growth and hamper their ability to maintain normal community life. Settlement activities are acts of provocation, in violation of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), which contain the basic parameters for the Middle East peace process. It is hardly necessary to point out that settlement-building activities only further exacerbate the already complex problems for which the current peace negotiations are trying to find a solution.

With regard to the Palestinian refugees, it is sad to note that more than 50 years after the partition of Palestine, some 3.6 million Palestinian refugees are still living in camps. These refugees have lived most of their lives — in some cases, their entire lives — in uncertainty as to their future and that of their children. These Palestinians are living with the vague hope that one day perhaps they will be able to return to their homes or obtain compensation for the losses they have suffered. Yet the many obstacles and the years of deprivation and suffering have never broken the will of the Palestinian people. They continue to cherish the belief that the peace process is the only way out of their predicament. Even if they consider that the peace process is an irreversible strategic choice, the Palestinian people, through their perseverance and determination, will not yield or bend until they have obtained what is rightfully theirs: peace and the right to determine their own destiny.

Over the years, the support of the international community for the struggle of the Palestinian people has increased. Many Governments, intergovernmental organizations, non governmental organizations and prominent individuals have rallied to support this noble cause throughout the world. At a time when the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are entering the most difficult phase, it is therefore crucial and essential that all those who support the peace process mobilize their efforts once again to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the question of Palestine so that the Middle East will regain the peace and stability of which it has been deprived for so long. The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People will remain firmly committed to ensuring that its programme of work will continue effectively, constructively and concretely to support the achievement of the objectives that are the basis of the peace process.

The Committee will also continue to cooperate with all Governments, intergovernmental organizations, United Nations bodies and non-governmental organizations to achieve a just and peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine that will one day allow Palestine to take its rightful place in the community of nations as a Member State of the Assembly. Let me also take this opportunity to express our deep gratitude to the many Governments and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations that have actively supported our work in the course of the year.

The Committee, aware of the fact that economic and social development are important underpinnings of peace and prosperity, has always tried to draw the attention of the international community to the need to provide adequate assistance to the Palestinian people, particularly at this sensitive transitional stage. The Committee would therefore like to thank the international donor community for the economic aid in various areas that it continues to extend to the Palestinian people.

We took note with satisfaction of the signing at the recent meeting in Tokyo, Japan, of an action plan aimed at supporting the peace process and accelerating the disbursement of funds earmarked for essential development projects.

The Committee also took note of the appointment Mr. Terje Roed-Larsen as the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority. We hope that he will continue to serve as coordinator of the various forms of United Nations assistance to the Palestinian people.

The Committee would like to solemnly reaffirm that the United Nations has a permanent responsibility with regard to the question of Palestine and that this important responsibility will continue until the question is resolved in all its aspects, in a satisfactory manner and in accordance with international legitimacy. It is for this reason that, as Chairman of the Committee and on behalf of the sponsors, I would like to draw the attention of the Assembly to the four draft resolutions that have been circulated under this agenda item under the symbols A/54/L.42, A/54/L.43, A/54/L.44 and A/54/L.45.

Allow me first, however, to inform the Assembly that in addition to the sponsors whose names appear in those documents, Viet Nam has also joined as a sponsor of the four draft resolutions.

The first three draft resolutions relate, respectively, to the work of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, the work of the Division for Palestinian Rights and the work of the Department of Public Information. They reiterate the important mandates given to those bodies by the General Assembly by large majorities in the past. They also reflect the recent positive developments in the peace process. The focus of these draft resolutions, which are based on the objectives of the Committee, is to intensify the Committee's efforts to promote the exercise of the inalienable rights of Palestinian people and the attainment of a just and peaceful solution to the question of Palestine. As in the past, the Committee intends to utilize the resources available to it in the best way possible and to concentrate its efforts on activities that have been effective in the implementation of its mandate. The necessary resources to finance the activities outlined in the three draft resolution are allocated in the programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001.

The fourth draft resolution, on the peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine, which reflects the position of the General Assembly with regard to the essential aspects of such a settlement, has been updated to refer to the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum.

The four draft resolutions that I have just introduced outline positions, mandates and work programmes that are of special importance at the current stage of the peace process. I call on the General Assembly to express its support for these mandates by an even greater majority than in the past.

The President: I now give the floor to Mr. Walter Balzan of Malta, Rapporteur of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, to introduce the Committee's report.

Mr. Balzan (Malta), Rapporteur of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People: It is an honour for me, in my capacity as Rapporteur of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, having assumed my new functions earlier this year, to present to the General Assembly the annual report of the Committee.

In the course of the past year, the Committee continued to carry out the mandate given to it by the General Assembly. The report covers the new

developments concerning the question of Palestine, the peace process and the activities of the Committee since last year's report.

The introduction to the report is contained in chapter I and outlines the Committee's position with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

Chapters II and III summarize the mandates of the Committee, the Division for Palestinian Rights and the Department of Public Information and contain information on the organization of the Committee's work during the year.

Chapter IV reviews the situation relating to the question of Palestine as monitored by the Committee in the course of 1999. This chapter takes note of a number of encouraging steps in the peace process since the signing on 4 September 1999 of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum. In particular, it refers to the further Israeli redeployment from parts of the West Bank, the beginning of the permanent status negotiations, the release of Palestinian prisoners, the agreement on the safe passage routes and the timetable for the conclusion of a framework agreement and final settlement agreement. It also contains reference to the convening on 15 July 1999 of the Conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention on Measures to Enforce the Convention in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including Jerusalem. The Chapter draws special attention to the serious problem posed by the settlement construction in the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem. It also contains information on settler activities, the situation with regard to the Palestinian prisoners, the Palestinian economy, and water resources available to the Palestinians; action by the donor community and the United Nations system; and the activities and budget constraints of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Chapter V reviews action taken by the Committee. It is divided into three main sections. Section A describes action taken in accordance with General Assembly resolution 53/39, aimed at promoting Palestinian rights in the United Nations and other intergovernmental bodies. This includes information on the resumed tenth emergency special session of the General Assembly and communications to the President of the Security Council and the Secretary-General. This section also includes information on the participation by the Committee Chairman in various international forums.

Section B contains an account of the implementation of the programme of work of the Committee and the Division for Palestinian Rights in accordance with General Assembly resolutions 53/39 and 53/40, respectively. It also takes note of the meetings of consultations of the Bureau of the Committee with members of the European Union and with the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Sir Kieran Prendergast. The section gives a brief account of the various international meetings organized in the course of the year, namely the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference, held in Rome on 18 and 19 February 1999; the United Nations African Meeting in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, held at Windhoek from 20 to 22 April 1999; and the United Nations International Meeting on the Convening of the Conference on Measures to Enforce the Fourth Geneva Convention in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including Jerusalem, held in Cairo on 14 and 15 June 1999.

The section contains an account of a visit by the Committee delegation to Gaza, from 16 to 18 June 1999, and of the meetings held in the course of the visit with Chairman Arafat and other high-level Palestinian officials. A subsection on the Committee's cooperation with non-governmental organizations has been added to this chapter. The rest of Section B deals with the publications of the Division for Palestinian Rights, the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL), the training programme for staff of the Palestinian Authority, the observance of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, and the project on the modernization of the records of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine.

In view of the special importance attached to the need to support the Bethlehem 2000 Project of the Palestinian Authority, a new section C was added to describe action taken in implementation of General Assembly resolution 53/27.

Chapter VI covers the work of the Department of Public Information in accordance with General Assembly resolution 53/41, including the publications and audiovisual activities of the Department, the work of United Nations Information Centres (UNICs) worldwide and other activities carried out by the Department.

The seventh and last chapter contains the recommendations of the Committee to the General

Assembly. In this chapter, the Committee notes that, recent breakthroughs in the peace process notwithstanding, the Palestinian people still carry the heavy burden of occupation. It also notes that a solution to the Palestine refugee question, in conformity with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948, is yet to be achieved. The Committee draws attention to the fact that the territory under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority now represents a disjointed multitude of enclaves surrounded by settlements, restricting the freedom of movement of the Palestinians and severely affecting their livelihood. It expresses concern that, over the years, this has had a damaging effect on the Palestinian economy and is likely to have an impact on the sustainability of the social and economic development of the Palestinian people, including its efforts at nation-building.

The Committee reaffirms its strong support for the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. It welcomes the resumption of the negotiations on permanent status issues and expresses the hope that they will be conducted in compliance with the timetable agreed in the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum. The Committee also maintains that at this crucial juncture, the international community, and in particular the co-sponsors of the peace process, should spare no effort in order to bring about a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the question of Palestine, as well as peace and stability to the entire region.

The Committee expresses concern about the situation on the ground, with the occupying Power continuing to create "facts on the ground" and to violate the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. It stresses the paramount importance for the international community, including the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention, to do everything in their power to protect the Palestinian people until the parties reach a permanent status agreement and it is fully implemented.

The Committee reaffirms the permanent responsibility of the United Nations with respect to the question of Palestine until a satisfactory settlement based on the relevant United Nations resolutions and international legitimacy is reached and the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people are fully realized.

The Committee also expresses the view that the adjustments made over the past year in the programme of meetings held, under its auspices, in the various regions, and in its cooperation with the non-governmental organization community made the programme more effective and focused. The Committee pledged to continue to review and assess this programme with a view to making it more effective and responsive to the evolving situation.

The Committee further notes that, in the course of the year, it has placed special emphasis on its programme of activities on supporting and promoting the Bethlehem 2000 Project of the Palestinian Authority. The Committee intends to continue this important activity in order to ensure broad international support for the Project, as well as active international participation in the millennial celebrations in Bethlehem.

The Committee emphasizes the essential contribution of the Division for Palestinian Rights in support of the Committee's objectives and requests the Division to continue its programme of publications and other activities, including the completion of its work on the UNISPAL collection and on the project for the modernization of the records of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine.

The Committee notes that the special information programme on the question of Palestine of the Department of Public Information has continued to be an important tool in informing the media and public opinion on issues relating to the question of Palestine, and would request that it be continued, with the necessary flexibility as may be required by developments affecting the question of Palestine.

Finally, in an effort to make its contribution to the achievement of a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the question of Palestine, the Committee calls on all States to join in this endeavour and invites the General Assembly again to recognize the importance of its role and to reconfirm its mandate with overwhelming support.

I trust that the report I have just introduced will be of assistance to the General Assembly in facilitating its deliberations on this important issue.

Mr. Kaddoumi (Palestine) (*spoke in Arabic*): I am pleased to take the floor and to congratulate you, Sir, on your election to preside over the General Assembly. Your election is a tribute to the struggle of the friendly people of Namibia, and its leadership in achieving liberation and independence. We wish Namibia success in its endeavours to ensure the welfare of its people and the continued development and prosperity of that country. We are confident of your ability to conduct the work of

this session of the General Assembly, and believe that it will crown with success the endeavours of the United Nations in establishing peace and security throughout the world.

We also thank your predecessor, Mr. Didier Opertti, who presided over the meetings of the previous session with outstanding competence. We would like to thank the Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, for his worthy efforts and serious endeavours to resolve outstanding international questions and problems with the aim of maintaining international peace and security and achieving social and economic development for all the peoples of the world.

We would also like to thank the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and its Chairman, Mr. Ibra Deguène Ka, for their persistent efforts in support of the struggle of the Palestinian people to end the Israeli occupation and its effects on the Palestinian territories.

The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed numerous tragedies and crises in various regions and countries of the world. The United Nations has made a considerable effort in discharging its duties towards those countries, and has dealt positively with the majority of such crises. The Organization was originally established with the aim of maintaining international peace and security and political stability, ensuring human rights, ending conflicts and wars and finding mechanisms to promote socio-economic development and friendly relations among nations on the basis of respect for the principle of equal rights of peoples and their right to self-determination. However, the United Nations did not empower any single State or group of States to act unilaterally, outside the framework of the United Nations, to deal with international disputes. No State is excepted from its resolutions; any State that is the subject of a resolution must abide by and implement its provisions.

For more than half a century, the General Assembly has been preoccupied on an annual basis with the question of Palestine, which is the crux of the Israeli-Arab conflict — a conflict that has jeopardized peace, security and stability in the Middle East. The General Assembly, and the Security Council in particular, have adopted several resolutions and held a number of international conferences on the subject. Regrettably, all of them have failed — or, rather, they were made to fail — because Israel, and those who support it, refuse to respect the principles of international legitimacy or to implement United Nations resolutions, engaging instead in procrastination and stalling.

The Charter clearly provides for the inadmissibility of the acquisition of the lands of others by force or through war. That principle was unanimously endorsed by Security Council resolution 242 (1967), which called for the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from the territories occupied by Israel in 1967. In subsequent resolutions, including 252 (1968), 465 (1980), 478 (1980) and 681 (1990), the Security Council identified and defined these regions, which are Palestinian and other Arab territories, including Al-Quds, occupied by Israel in 1967.

In this regard, I cannot fail to recall the report that the State Department of the United States submitted to Congress, which defined those areas as being the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan Heights. We therefore call upon Israel, the occupying Power and a Member of the United Nations, to abide by the principles of internationally binding resolutions and the provisions of the Charter, which are clear in this regard. Members of the United Nations commit themselves to abiding by Security Council resolutions and to implementing them in accordance with the Charter. Security Council resolution 242 (1967) provides for the need to achieve a just resolution of the problem of refugees. The Council debated the question of the situation resulting from the Israeli aggression of 1967. The Council distinguished between the refugees of 1948 and those displaced in 1967, adopting resolution 237 (1967) in respect of those Palestinians who were displaced and calling for their return to the regions where the military operations of 1967 had taken place.

In conformity with this position, the Declaration of Principles, signed in September 1993 between the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Government of Israel, provided for the return of the displaced persons. A quadripartite committee was formed, made up of representatives of Palestine, Israel, Egypt and Jordan, with the aim of arriving at modalities to facilitate the readmission of persons displaced from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967. However, Israel impeded the work of that committee and froze its meetings by failing to attend. The displaced persons, who number about 800,000, are still suffering from the scourge and tragedy of displacement and are denied admission to their territory. That is how Israel respects the resolutions of the Security Council and the articles of the bilateral agreements concluded with the other parties.

I should now like to discuss the question of the refugees. Count Bernadotte, the United Nations Mediator

in Palestine, who was assassinated by Jewish terrorist gangs in 1948, stated in a progress report that the displacement of the Palestinian Arabs was the result of panic stemming from conflict in the areas where the fighting was concentrated and from rumours stemming from alleged or real acts of expulsion and terrorism. On the basis of the recommendations of Count Bernadotte, the General Assembly adopted resolution 194 (111), which included among its major provisions the requirement that those refugees wishing to return to their homes should be permitted to do so at the earliest practical date and that compensation should be paid for the property of those who chose not to return.

A procedure for the speedy return of the Palestinian refugees to their homeland must be established in line with their rights under resolution 194 (III) of 1948. Settlement outside Palestine would require the consent of the Palestinian people, who insist on returning to their homeland and their property. Moreover, settlement is broadly opposed in neighbouring Arab countries, particularly those that for more than 50 years have been shouldering the burden of the Palestinian diaspora. Following the second Gulf war, in March 1991, the former President of the United States, Mr. George Bush, undertook a political initiative that was accepted by the Arabs and by Israel: that of convening the Madrid Peace Conference. That initiative was based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) and on the principle of land for peace with a view to achieving peace and security for the States of the region and guaranteeing the legitimate political rights of the Palestinian people.

After nearly two years of difficult negotiations in Washington, there was no tangible progress owing to the intransigence of the then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Then a new Government took power, and the Declaration of Principles was signed following negotiations in Oslo. The two parties to the Declaration of Principles signed at Washington on 13 September 1993 agreed to negotiations in two stages: transitional and permanent status stages. The Declaration stipulated that the aim of the negotiations on permanent status was to implement Security Council resolution 242 (1967). The two parties agreed to the following topics of the permanent-status negotiations: Al-Quds, refugees, settlements, borders and water.

The purpose of the transitional period was to avoid giving Israel an additional opportunity to pursue its policy of land expropriation and the building of new settlements. But Israel continued to pursue that policy and other ugly practices. This prompted United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to acknowledge that Israel's policy could destroy the peace process. It has been more than five years since the signing of the Declaration of Principles and the Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Israel is still stalling and refusing to implement the provisions of those agreements relating to such matters as transfer of powers, the process of so-called redeployment, the release of detainees and prisoners and the return of displaced persons.

Both sides have agreed that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are a single territorial unit, but, by artificially linking Gaza with the West Bank, the Barak Government is trying to consecrate their separation. A result of the dismemberment of Palestinian lands has been the establishment of geographically disjointed bantustans within the occupied West Bank. This will inevitably lead to a disturbing situation detrimental to the establishment of peace.

As members know, the General Assembly, by resolution 181 (II) of 29 November 1947, approved the recommendation that Palestine be partitioned into two States, an Arab State and a Jewish State. That same recommendation also proposed boundaries for the two States. But Israel rushed to seize by force a great part of the territory that had been allocated to the Palestinian Arab State. It continued its gradual occupation until 1967, when it occupied every inch of the land of the Arab State of Palestine, and when by force and war it seized territories belonging to neighbouring Arab countries. At that point, the Security Council adopted its resolution 242 (1967), which reaffirmed the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force and called for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from the areas occupied during the 1967 aggression. That resolution stressed the importance of recognizing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all States and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries.

On 25 March 1999, the heads of State or Government of the European Union reaffirmed their support for the peace process on the basis of land for peace, with a view to guaranteeing collective and individual security for the Palestinian and the Israeli peoples. They affirmed the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination, including the option of establishing a sovereign State of their own; they called upon both parties to seek a solution that would not prejudice that right — a right which no one has the power to veto — and they expressed their belief that the

establishment of a democratic State of Palestine would be the best safeguard for Israel's security and would ensure that Israel is accepted as a peer by other States of the region.

Mr. Barak won the recent Israeli elections and made his position clear when, standing at the graveside of Yitzhak Rabin, he said that there would be no return to the 1967 borders and no foreign army west of the Jordan river. That means that he wants no border of the State of Palestine to be contiguous with any other Arab State. He also emphasized that Israel would continue to exercise sovereignty over the West Bank settlements and would hold on to a united Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty as the "eternal capital" of Israel. Then, Mr. Barak paid his first visit to Washington, where he met for hours with President Clinton. The Israeli newspaper *Ha-aretz* reported that strategic cooperation between the two States was strengthened and that the leaders had reaffirmed support for Israeli defence and deterrence and for joint strategic planning.

How are we going to explain this American-Israeli cooperation, its effect on the peace process and its revival? The paper quoted Mr. Barak's statement to Mr. William Cohen, the United States Secretary of Defense:

> "The trend towards peace is conditional upon our economic and military power; whether we succeed in achieving peace or not, it is important that we know that we are proceeding from a position of strength".

America provided Israel with fifty F-16 aircraft.

As for peace with Syria, Mr. Barak said:

> "The compromise solutions which we can accept in negotiations with Syria will become clear after knowing what President Assad will provide as far as Lebanon and terrorism, the question of water, the opening of embassies, borders, security arrangements, early warning systems and the kind of economic cooperation are concerned".

Barak volunteered to explain President Clinton's statement regarding the right of Palestinian refugees to live in safety in places of their choice. Making a point that there was a misunderstanding of Clinton's statement, Barak said:

> "Our position is clear. I do not believe that any refugee under any conditions can return to Israel. It is better to achieve solutions for the refugees in the places where they live now".

Do these positions indicate peaceful intentions? In commenting on the establishment of a Palestinian State, Barak said that he will "discuss with the Palestinians the entity in which they will live in the general context of the questions that are subject to negotiations".

Occupation and annexation of territory by force cannot be accepted as a point of departure for peaceful solutions. Human rights, rather, the rights of all citizens, cannot be bought or sold. No State or Government can co-opt this right or dispose of it. Hence, the Palestinian refugees have legitimate rights that they must exercise.

As for Al-Quds (Jerusalem), it is the cradle of the three major religions. It is the crux of the conflict in the region, the treasure of nations and the cornerstone in the peace process. Finding a just solution to the question of Al-Quds will achieve comprehensive peace and security in the Middle East.

The General Assembly in its resolution 181 (II) recommended the establishment of a *corpus separatum* for the city of Al-Quds. On the other hand, in March 1948 the Security Council took up the situation in Al-Quds, called for a ceasefire and decided to establish a subsidiary committee to reconsider the draft resolution relevant to Al-Quds.

The first step for the success of the peace process is the acceptance by Israel of its adherence to the Security Council resolutions that form the basis of the current negotiations, that is, the implementation of Security Council resolution 242 (1967) and withdrawal from all the territories it occupied in 1967 so as to allow the Palestinian people to exercise their sovereignty over these territories. We are confident that a sovereign State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital and the State of Israel will find an acceptable solution under international guarantees to preserve the political, humanitarian and religious dimensions of the city of Al-Quds, the key to peace.

Following this detailed discussion, one must wonder about the role of the United States, the sponsor of the peace process. We notice on the basis of experience that the United States slacks off in prompting Israel to honour its commitments. The proof of that is that seven years of

negotiations have elapsed without achieving the required accomplishment on the Palestinian track, while there is a complete stalemate on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks. Mr. Netanyahu acknowledged this in the Israeli Knesset on 18 November 1998 when he stated:

> "I would like to say something about our American friends. The United States has devoted major efforts to cooperate with us, to reduce the level of Palestinian demands. The Palestinians have started by calling for a redeployment from 35 per cent of the land. We reduced that to 25 per cent. Then the American proposals reduced that to 13 per cent, of which 3 per cent has been set aside as a natural protectorate."

This proves that the United States was pressuring the Palestinian side to acquiesce to Israeli demands instead of pressuring Israel. The United States is capable, no doubt, of pressuring Israel into withdrawing from all Arab territories occupied in 1967. Such pressure was already applied and bore fruit during the second Gulf war when the United States ordered Yitzhak Rabin, the former Prime Minister of Israel, not to make any movements, and he obeyed. Mr. Barak is trying to manipulate the tracks with the goal of creating contradictions between them through international mediation and illusory projects. The Lebanese President, Mr. Emile Lahoud, defined Lebanon's position by saying:

> "If they want to withdraw without a just and comprehensive solution, then peace will not have been established in the region. Our position in Lebanon is based on persuasion, and we cannot accept a solution without withdrawal from Lebanon and Syria and without the exercise by the Palestinians of their right to return to their land. The right of return is a sacred right; hence, our decision is final."

This clearly means that the three Arab tracks are closely interrelated.

The Palestine Liberation Organization is still on the list of terrorist organizations in the United States Congress, based on a decision taken by the Congress in 1988, even though Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization agreed to mutual recognition a few years ago. But the presence of the Palestine Liberation Organization on the terrorist list is a means of bringing pressure to bear on it to accept the policy of fait accompli pursued by Israel. Numerous European States have raised the level of representation of the Palestine Liberation Organization. But America has kept our office in Washington without an official representational character, and the United States President has to ask permission of the United States Congress every six months to deal with the Palestine Liberation Organization or with the Palestinian National Authority.

It is high time to lift the unjust embargo imposed against the Iraqi people and to put an end to the American/British raids on Iraq which claim the lives of tens of victims every day. These acts of aggression go beyond the rules of international law and order, breach peace and security in the region and consecrate a state of concern and political instability in the Middle East. They create a climate of non-credibility in United States efforts for the success of the Middle East peace process.

The creation of the Palestinian State is not an end in itself. The Palestinian people must exercise its sovereignty over its territories occupied in 1967 on the basis of the right of people to self-determination without foreign intervention.

Commitment to resolutions of international legitimacy and to their implementation creates the proper climate for peaceful coexistence and international friendly cooperation and conciliation. The balance of interests among the parties concerned is the best way to achieve a peaceful settlement. Moreover, preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction, the subjection of nuclear facilities to the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency and the signing of the NPT are the best way to ensure peaceful coexistence. The creation of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East and finding a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict are the keys to peace in the Middle East. Now is an opportune time to achieve peaceful coexistence among the peoples of the Middle East. But if the policy of double standards continues, and if the United Nations is unable to participate actively in the search for just solutions, this opportunity to achieve peace and political stability will be lost and the region will be overwhelmed by new threatening conflicts.

Mr. Bouah-Kamon (Côte d'Ivoire), Vice-President, took the Chair.

Ms. Rasi (Finland): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. The Central and Eastern European countries associated with the European Union — Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia,

Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia — and the associated countries Cyprus and Malta, as well as the European Free Trade Association country member of the European Economic Area, Liechtenstein, align themselves with this statement.

There is real momentum towards peace and towards real progress on the Palestinian track of the peace process. This fall we have already witnessed two significant steps forward: the signature of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum and the resumption of the permanent status talks. The European Union strongly supported the agreement and welcomed both steps. The Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum puts implementation of the earlier agreements back on track. It provides an ambitious time-table for negotiating a permanent end to the long-standing conflict between the two peoples.

These steps required courage and determination on the part of the two leaders: Prime Minister Barak and President Arafat. The outcome was largely a result of direct negotiations between the parties. This is a significant new reality. It bodes well for the next steps of the process and thus also for the question being discussed today.

The progress made so far in implementing the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum is welcome. The two releases of Palestinian prisoners, the opening of the southern safe-passage route and the first Israeli redeployment have been a measure in rebuilding trust between the parties. However, there have also been difficulties. The negotiations on the northern safe-passage route are not progressing as planned. The second Israeli redeployment has been delayed, as has engaging in the actual negotiations on final status issues. The European Union would like to take this opportunity to call upon the international community to lend its full support to this promising but critical phase in the peace process.

The inauguration of the Gaza airport in November last year was an important milestone in the economic cooperation between the parties, and the European Union warmly welcomed it. We now call upon the parties to complete negotiations, within the agreed time-frame, on remaining economic issues, especially those regarding the industrial zone in Karni and the Gaza port.
In this context, the European Union strongly insists on the need to abstain from any acts that could prejudice the final outcome of the negotiations or harm the atmosphere. Israeli settlement activities, including house demolitions, continue to be of concern to the European Union, which considers them illegal and an obstacle to peace.

The European Union also stresses the importance of the commitment to the principles of democracy and the respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms. The implementation of the measures recommended in the report of the Council on Foreign Relations and the signing of the tripartite action plan are significant steps in this direction.

The visits by President Ahtisaari and Foreign Minister Halonen, as representatives of the European Union, underline the European Union's unwavering support for the peace process and its determination to stay actively engaged in advancing it.
The European Union will continue to make constructive and effective contributions — including through its special envoy, Ambassador Moratinos — in order to restore and strengthen confidence between the parties. We are ready to be fully associated with the implementation of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum and to contribute to the issues discussed in the final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

The European Union underlines the importance of progress in the peace process with a view to improving, *inter alia*, investor confidence and to promoting sustainability and greater self-sufficiency of the Palestinian economy. The European Union reaffirms its resolution to continue its economic and technical assistance. We will especially concentrate on helping to build a sound and prosperous economy in the Palestinian territory, so as to facilitate social and political stability for the Palestinians. Economic cooperation between the countries in the region, and between those countries and the European Union, would cement a genuine peace.

With regard to support for the Palestinian people, we would also like to mention the new, tenth Convention between the European Commission and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East that was signed in October. The new Convention contains important contributions to education, health, relief and social programmes.

In concluding, the European Union reiterates its firm commitment to a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement based on the Madrid and Oslo accords. We are determined to fully assist the parties — if they so wish — in their efforts to bring about lasting peace in the Middle East.

Mr. Shobokshi (Saudi Arabia) (*spoke in Arabic*): I should have liked my statement on the question of

Palestine, under consideration by the General Assembly today, to be optimistic, following the conclusion of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum that ended the stalemate in the peace process brought about by the policies of the former Israeli Government. Regrettably, the current Israeli Government's approach to the question of the settlements in the occupied territories gives me no cause for optimism. Rather, it threatens the peace process and could even prevent it from resolving a conflict that has lasted over half a century.

It is noteworthy that, between July and September of this year — a period of no more than three months — the Israeli Government added 2,600 new settler units, whereas the former Government approved no more than 3,000 new units in the course of an entire year. This makes it perfectly clear that the policy of the current Israeli Government on settlements is inconsistent with its declared desire to achieve a genuine peace with the Palestinians and its Arab neighbours. The former Government initiated the construction of a settlement in Jebel Abu Ghneim in Arab East Jerusalem only three weeks after the signing of the agreement on Al-Khalil. The current Government began the construction of the new settler units three weeks after the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum. The decision to build the settlement in Jebel Abu Ghneim prompted the international community to criticize the Government of Israel and to put the peace process on hold for 18 months. Will history repeat itself? We hope not.

In order to justify the establishment of these units on lands that should be returned to their legitimate owners in the final status phase, Israel claims that the current expanded settlements need to grow naturally. This is not true at all. All experts state that the growth rate should be no higher than 2 per cent. One settlement will be expanded by an additional 1,100 units, although it currently contains only 2,000. This so-called natural expansion is thus occurring at a rate of 55 per cent.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Palestinian reaction to this increased settler activity should be extremely negative. President Arafat has condemned the expansion, describing it as destructive to the peace process. Addressing the international community and the United Nations, represented by the Secretary-General, he described Israel's action as a seizure of Palestinian land and a usurpation of Palestinian rights. The Israeli Government must take a clear stance and declare its readiness to rescind all its settlement resolutions and decisions, especially those adopted by the Ministry of Housing.

These continued settlement activities, coming at a time when the international community is tirelessly seeking to support the peace process in the Middle East, are unacceptable and inconsistent with logic and justice. They do not reflect a desire to achieve a just and comprehensive settlement. They are also inconsistent with Israel's international commitments.

At its forty-third session, in resolution 43/177, the General Assembly acknowledged the proclamation of the State of Palestine by the Palestinian National Council on 5 November, 1988 and affirmed the need to enable the Palestinian people to exercise their sovereignty over their territory occupied since 1967. At its last session, in resolution 53/42, the General Assembly stressed the necessity for commitment to the principle of land for peace and the implementation of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), which form the basis of the Middle East peace process. It also stressed the need for the realization of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, primarily the right to self-determination.

The establishment of the State of Israel and its subsequent occupation of the Palestinian territories severely harmed the Palestinian economy. The consistent Israeli practice of stifling the Palestinian economy by closing the territories under any pretext resulted in a serious decline of the Palestinian gross national product, a huge increase in the rate of unemployment and damage to the tune of billions of dollars to the economy. The international community must therefore support and improve the Palestinian economy, thus enabling it to grow and enabling the Palestinian people to live in dignity and prosperity on their national soil.

Mr. Jasni (Malaysia): My delegation is pleased to participate in the debate on the question of Palestine in this meeting of the Assembly today, coinciding with the commemoration of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. My delegation believes that it is important for the international community to continue to remind itself on this day of the still unresolved issue of Palestine and of its responsibility to support the peace process.

My delegation welcomes the recent Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum between Palestine and Israel and fervently hopes that it will pave the way towards a final settlement of the Palestine-Israel issue and, beyond that, to the resolution of the entire Arab-Israeli question. We are happy that the signing of this Memorandum allowed for

a resumption of the peace process that had been suspended by the former Prime Minister of Israel, Mr. Netanyahu, since last September. We are hopeful that the change in stance on the part of Mr. Barak, the new Prime Minister, showing willingness to continue with peace talks on the basis of the land-for-peace formula, will give new impetus to the peace process. The Palestinians have demonstrated their commitment to the peace process and would expect nothing less than a similar commitment by the Israelis. Indeed, it is the expectation of the international community that, this time around, all of the agreements solemnly arrived at between the two sides will be implemented without further hitch.

It is therefore with dismay that we note that the new Government of Israel issued 2,600 tenders for settlement construction in the occupied territories during its first 3 months, as compared to an average of 3,000 a year under the Netanyahu Government. Needless to say, this does not contribute to generating the kind of confidence among Palestinians which is essential for the final resolution of the Palestinian issue. It contributes only to reinforcing the sense of cynicism on the part of the people of Palestine, who remember too well the history of broken promises and unfulfilled pledges of the provisions contained in the Oslo and Wye River agreements. Clearly, given the less than exemplary record of past Israeli Governments in living up to their treaty commitments with the Palestinians, the onus lies with the Government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak to ensure that the deal hammered out at Sharm el-Sheikh will be kept with no further equivocations or prevarications.

My delegation calls on Israel to conduct its ongoing negotiations with the Palestinian side in good faith dictated by the need to resolve the issue once and for all and in the best interests of all concerned. Every effort should be made to pursue the goals of peace, security and cooperation cherished by all in the region. We call on all the parties to implement in full their commitments under existing agreements and to refrain from actions that could jeopardize the success of the negotiations. It is therefore imperative for the international community to encourage the parties concerned to keep their negotiations at this crucial stage on track so as to ensure the final resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli issue within the expected time-frame.

Now more than ever the United Nations has an important role to play to ensure the realization of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, primarily their right to self-determination. The United Nations must continue to be involved in the peace process, both as the guardian of international legitimacy and in the mobilization and provision of international assistance for development. The work of the United Nations agencies and committees particularly devoted to the Palestinian issues, such as the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories, must continue to be supported.

UNRWA, which takes care of some 3.6 million Palestinian refugees, must be provided with sufficient funding to carry out its work, while the two committees must be allowed to continue their mandates to support the Palestinian people in their quest for the realization of their inalienable rights and to highlight to the outside world the plight of the Palestinian people living in the occupied territories. My delegation has been a traditional co-sponsor of the four draft resolutions pertaining to these matters which are being considered under this agenda item and is pleased to be so again this year.

For peace to take root and flourish, my delegation believes that it must be accompanied by economic growth and development and improvement in the social and living conditions of the people. We call on the international donor community to continue to provide support for the rehabilitation of the Palestinian economy and to ensure that the socio-economic development of the Palestinian society continues to be viable and sustainable.

My delegation wishes to take this opportunity to reaffirm Malaysia's continued strong commitment to and unwavering support for the Palestinian people and their leadership. Malaysia will continue to support the Palestinians in their just and legitimate struggle for self-determination, including the right to establish an independent and sovereign Palestinian State in their homeland in the near future. We are confident that under the able and wise leadership of President Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian people will triumph in their indefatigable endeavours in realizing that objective. It is imperative for the international community to lend its resolute support to the Palestinian leadership and people in their unrelenting and peaceful quest for justice, freedom and independence. We look forward to the day in the new millennium when the Palestinian people and the refugees in the Middle East region can truly enjoy a just, comprehensive and lasting peace.

My delegation fervently hopes that the long quest by the Palestinian people for statehood will be finally realized soon in fulfilment of their expectations. Malaysia looks forward to welcoming the State of Palestine into the international community in the near future.

Mr. Nejad Hosseinian (Islamic Republic of Iran): Today, on the occasion of the observance of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, I would like to reiterate once more the support of the people and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the Palestinian people and their just cause.

During the past 50 years, the international community has witnessed the Palestinian people being uprooted from their homeland, dispersed into exile and stripped of their rights. Attempts have been made to negate their existence altogether. The question of Palestine remains the oldest question in our contemporary world, and we still witness continuation of such Israeli practices as the construction of settlements, the confiscation of lands, the destruction and confiscation of Palestinian homes and properties, the desecration of the holy places, unjustified detention and torture of detainees. The refugee status of millions of Palestinians who live in the diaspora and in refugee camps under precarious conditions has been perpetuated.

The conditions in the occupied territories are a serious violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The Security Council has confirmed the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to the occupied territories, including Jerusalem, in 25 resolutions. Many of those resolutions call upon Israel, the occupying Power, to comply with the provisions of the Convention and to accept its *de jure* applicability. The General Assembly, by an overwhelming majority of Member States at the tenth emergency special session, on 9 February 1999, and the recent Conference of High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention, held on 15 July 1999, reaffirmed the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to the occupied territories, including Jerusalem, and reiterated the need for full respect for its provisions. Unfortunately, the efforts of the international community in forcing the Israeli regime to observe humanitarian laws in the occupied territories have produced no result.

The international outrage against and condemnation of Israel have not changed the pattern of its inhuman behaviour towards the Palestinians and its illegal policies in the occupied territories. The Israeli regime has with impunity trampled upon the most fundamental rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to self-determination, which has, as a result, driven millions of people into the diaspora. By the same token, the policy of expanding Jewish settlements and the process of judaization of Al-Quds al-Sharif, which is of paramount importance to the entire Islamic world, continue to be in force, regardless of the fact that they are illegal and constitute a flagrant violation of the resolutions of the United Nations and international law. Moreover, the imposition of countless repressive measures, such as detention, deportation, home demolition and other forms of collective punishment against the Palestinian people in the occupied territories has continued. The continuation of repressive measures has attracted the attention, as well as the condemnation, of the international community. The Israeli regime should be forced to heed the call of the world community to put an end to the infamous practice of collective punishment.

The Israeli regime has always tried to neutralize the United Nations and to greatly limit its involvement in the question of Palestine. In fact, the real aim has been to dissociate the Palestinian issue from international law and legitimacy, including the relevant resolutions of the United Nations. However, the United Nations, as the only universal and most representative body of the international community, has a permanent responsibility to tackle the Palestinian issue, with a view to bringing peace and justice to a region marked by enduring crises and engulfed in a whirlpool of constant tension and destructive confrontation for more than half a century.

The Israeli actions and policies are undoubtedly the main source of instability and insecurity in the region; they thus create an atmosphere of fear and anxiety among the peoples of the region as well as in the entire international community. The current situation in the Middle East continues to be scarred by wounds and injustice as a result of the Israeli expansionist policy. The continued occupation of Palestine, southern Lebanon and the Syrian Golan, in contravention of the relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, represents a persistent Israeli policy of domination and aggression.

The failure of the current diplomatic efforts known as the Middle East peace process to take into account the root causes of the crisis — namely, the organized occupation of Palestinian lands and the forced mass expulsion of its inhabitants — not only prevents the restoration of the inalienable rights of the oppressed people of Palestine, but also leads to further negligence of their rights. It also provides Israel with another

opportunity to continue without concern its policies of occupation, suppression and invasion against Palestinians and other nations of the region. We believe that the root causes of the question of Palestine must be addressed if we are to find a just solution to the problems in the Middle East.

In this context, we believe that a comprehensive and just solution to the issue of Palestine lies in the restoration of all rights of the Palestinian people, including the return of all Palestinian refugees and displaced persons to their homeland, the full and free exercise of their right to self-determination and the liberation of all occupied territories.

Mr. Kumalo (South Africa): In 1961 in Belgrade, the First Conference of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement declared its support for the full restoration of all the rights of the Arab people of Palestine in conformity with the United Nations Charter and United Nations resolutions. Almost four decades later, this commitment remains valid. The long-standing and traditional solidarity of the Movement in favour of a durable solution to the question of Palestine is unwavering and unchanging.

At the twelfth Non-Aligned Movement summit in South Africa in September last year, the heads of State or Government reaffirmed support for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to return to their homeland and to have their own independent State, with Jerusalem as its capital; and the withdrawal of Israel, the occupying Power, from all of the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem, and the other Arab territories occupied since 1967. The Movement furthermore reaffirmed its position on occupied East Jerusalem, the illegal Israeli settlements, and the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 to all the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem. These positions were repeated by the Ministers of the Non-Aligned Movement in New York in September this year.

South Africa supports the struggle of the Palestinian people. We firmly believe that the achievement of their inalienable right to self-determination and independence is pivotal for the achievement of a sustained and comprehensive peace in the Middle East. South Africa, which has recognized the State of Palestine and has established full diplomatic relations, has been a member of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People since 1997. We stated to the Committee in 1997,

> "The struggle and sacrifices of our people against apartheid could not but inspire us to support the fight of the Palestinian people for self-determination and the establishment of an independent State."

The Committee, under the able leadership of Ambassador Ibra Deguène Ka of Senegal, as an organ established by the Assembly to deal with the question of Palestine, continues to have an important role during this transitional period.

In collaboration with the Division for Palestinian Rights and the Department of Public Information, the Committee serves to increase international awareness of the question of Palestine. At this historic juncture for the Palestinian people, the continued support of the United Nations, its organizations and its agencies cannot be underestimated.

We welcome the report of the Committee, contained in document A/54/35, submitted to the Assembly. One of the important functions of the Committee is to provide a forum for discussion for Governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. South Africa had the opportunity to participate as Chair of the Non-Aligned Movement at the important international conferences held under the auspices of the Committee this year. In Windhoek, Namibia, the role of African members of the Movement in the struggle against colonialism and foreign occupation was emphasized. We stressed the significant role of African member States in the promotion of self-determination and the desire for the creation of a world based on tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

The Meeting in Cairo, Egypt, expressed concern at the illegal settlement activities by Israel in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. Moreover, there was a call for all efforts to be made to enhance respect for international humanitarian law established for the protection of civilian persons in time of war. It is incumbent upon the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention to do their utmost to respect and to ensure respect for that Convention.

It is heartening to note the unanimous support of the international community earlier this month for the Assembly resolution entitled "Bethlehem 2000". South Africa is of the view that the creation of a strong, self-sufficient and sustainable economic infrastructure for Bethlehem, Palestine, would provide a sound

underpinning for social and political stability — a prerequisite for peace.

South Africa firmly believes that peaceful negotiation is the only means of ensuring lasting peace, security and stability in the region. We welcome the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum in September between the Palestinian and Israeli sides. It is our fervent hope that the current peace process efforts to reach a final settlement between the Palestinian and Israeli sides will continue with renewed vigour.

This morning, the United Nations commemorated the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, as Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, issued a strong statement of the Movement's continued support for the peace process. President Mbeki called upon the international community

> "to remain steadfast in its commitment and support for a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East and the realization of the legitimate rights of all Palestinians".

Endorsing the resolutions before us today would send a clear message that, until a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement is reached, the question of Palestine remains the permanent responsibility of the United Nations.

Mr. Lancry (Israel): *(spoke in French)*: Since the Oslo accords, Israeli-Palestinian relations have been developing in one of the most notably promising areas.

This relationship between Palestinians and Israelis, long disturbed by the Middle East conflict and its tragic succession of wars and violence, is now free of the profoundly devastating burdens of the past. Today, it shows the main features of peace between our two peoples.

The major turning point represented by the accords of 13 September 1993, sealed by the dazzling image of the historic handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat in Washington, marked, from the Israeli-Palestinian viewpoint, support for a new beginning. This is nothing less than a shift from the frozen attitude of reciprocal alienation and denial to a logic of peace in which the emergence and acceptance of the other side become essential. In diplomatic language, this is called mutual recognition, which is what Israelis and Palestinians agreed to in Oslo.

Mutual recognition is no doubt the high point and the main axis of the development of Israeli-Palestinian peace. In it the walls of rejection collapse and are transmuted into a space of acceptance, dialogue and the self-advancement of two peoples. Mutual recognition, with its permanent expansion, is a prodigious tool for rooting the peace process deeply and making it irreversible. An incontestable driving force, it is capable of transcending ideological circumstances and political changes, as well as the often violent contradictions inherent in the transition from an old to a new order.

Thus, we have seen in Israel, since the signing of the Oslo accords, politics and ideology changing in the light of the democratic choices made, without the foundation of these accords — namely, mutual recognition between Israelis and Palestinians — being jeopardized. Beyond that, even the former Government, that of Benjamin Netanyahu, which arose out of opposition to the spirit and letter of Oslo, in exercising its functions had to submit to the powerful force of conversion brought about by mutual recognition. The signing of the Hebron accords in January 1997 and the Wye River Memorandum in October 1998 embody the thrust and considerable scope of integration and political socialization that are implied in mutual recognition.

The present Government, led by Ehud Barak, whose actions and policies were quickly expressed through the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum, constitutes, in the pluralistic range of its political components, a majority acquired through the growing virtues of mutual recognition.

I have taken the trouble in my inaugural statement to the United Nations to celebrate the philosophical foundation par excellence of the peace process. I have done so at the expense of repetition, indeed, to the point of an anaphoric blizzard of the idea of mutual recognition, because through it we touch the very heart of living power and the germ of real reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.

Peace between peoples cannot be declined according to one strict political grammar that excludes all others. In this germination of peace, we need the wind of broad reconciliation to sow a seed in the furrows where scarred memories are laid to rest and the growth of our fields of convergence must be hastened.

We, Palestinians and Israelis, must take charge of our evolution from mutual recognition to knowledge and

acceptance of each other in validating our joint aspirations and in respecting our differences.

If official recognition has fundamental value for the future it is because it includes and creates a dynamic of peace that is vital in order to rise above the press of daily events haunted by an often murky past.

More immediately, in this prestigious forum of the United Nations, the dynamic and dialogue of peace must allow us, Palestinians and Israelis, to free ourselves from the doctrinaire shackles of preserving a mindless ritual: that of periodically pillorying Israel through the persistence of certain obsolete resolutions that refuse to disappear, pillorying by United Nations opprobrium based on a majority "follow the leader" attitude that rarely changes.

In our very region these days, irresponsible anti-Israeli accusations proffered in a gust of obscurantism from another age, shaped in the mould of rumours and medieval myths, attribute to Israel the deliberate poisoning of Palestinian babies and their mothers.

Given these distortions, the incredible paroxysm of accusation or the practice of laying perpetual diplomatic siege to Israel, the dynamic and dialogue of peace are both urgent and essential.

Since 1993 direct negotiation has brought Israelis and Palestinians together. It is creating agreements, compromises and successive political achievements that are unprecedented from the Palestinian viewpoint. Direct negotiations are also giving rise to Israeli-Palestinian proximity, people to people, in a broad range of inter-community activities that make up the canvas of our reconciliation and of our future.

Any attack, systematic or deliberate, on the nature of direct negotiations in substance or in form reduces the spirit of openness and of founding dialogue and strengthens the ill-considered practice of hard-line diplomacy against Israel under the emblem of the family of nations.

The Government of Ehud Barak, resolute in its vision and its strategy for peace, is determined to put an end to an age-old conflict and to reach an era of coexistence with shared development and prosperity. At the starting point of the permanent status negotiations, which will set our common destinies, including that of the Palestinian entity as it will emerge out of the negotiations, an overriding imperative becomes clear: the ethical and political commitment linking the partners to peace and binding them to conduct and take responsibility for their dialogue and their actions with a vision of future generations, a vision as free as possible from the torments and vicissitudes of yesterday and nurtured, as far as possible, by the successes of today and the triumphs of tomorrow.

Mr. Aboul Gheit (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): Today is the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. On this day in 1947, the General Assembly adopted resolution 181 (II), which altered the face of history in the Middle East and divided Palestine into two States under the British Mandate — one Arab and one Jewish — and also established the city of Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum*. Today, we remember with the world that in spite of the scores of Security Council and General Assembly resolutions that have ensued, the Palestinian people are still deprived of their natural rights to exercise self-determination and to establish their independent State on their own territory. The consideration by the General Assembly of the item entitled "Question of Palestine" on this day every year reminds us all of the historical responsibility of the United Nations towards this question — a responsibility that will not be fulfilled until a just, lasting and comprehensive solution to this issue, in all its aspects, is reached.

The international community realizes now more than ever before that the question of Palestine constitutes the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict and that without reaching a just and comprehensive solution to this question, the Middle East, with its strategic importance to the world, will remain a region plagued by instability and tension. It is important for Israel to recognize this fact as well, so that no one will be under the illusory impression that postponing the resolution of some aspects of the question of Palestine would create an atmosphere conducive to the establishment of long-term peace or that temporary and short-term solutions or partial agreements could be a substitute for the comprehensive settlement of the question in all its aspects.

After several long decades of conflict, both the Palestinian and Israeli sides chose peace as the path to reaching a solution. This has led to the initiation of the peace process in Madrid in 1991 and to the agreements reached afterwards, from the Declaration of Principles in 1993 to the Memorandum signed at Sharm el-Sheikh last September.

Egypt has always been keen to encourage both the Palestinian and the Israeli parties to achieve progress on

the Palestinian track. In this context, Egypt welcomed the implementation by Israel of the commitments it undertook in the Wye River Memorandum concerning the release of a number of Palestinian prisoners and the opening of the southern safe passage route between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. We hope that the other commitments of the interim period will soon be implemented. At the forefront of those commitments are the conclusion of the second phase and the implementation of the third phase, the redeployment by Israel of its forces in the West Bank, the release of the remaining Palestinian prisoners, the opening of the northern safe passage route and the inauguration of the Gaza sea port and the completion of all its facilities. The implementation of the remaining commitments will undoubtedly serve as the proper ground for the conduct of the final status negotiations in an atmosphere of restored confidence and stability.

There is no doubt that those who follow the peace process in general, and the events in the occupied Palestinian territory in particular, feel increasingly concerned and alarmed by the trend in Israeli settlement activities. It is both distressing and disturbing to find that the Israeli Government that took office last July has failed to follow a clear and decisive approach in putting an end to settlement activities, at least as a gesture of goodwill in its negotiations with the Palestinian side. On the contrary, we find continued support, both in word and deed, for the illegal and illegitimate position of the settlers in the occupied Palestinian territory, who are there in blatant violation of all relevant United Nations resolutions and of Israel's duties and commitments as an occupying Power under the Fourth Geneva Convention. That Convention prohibits the occupying Power, *inter alia*, from transferring its civilian population to the territory it occupies.

It is regrettable that this support cannot be viewed as anything but a blatant attempt to consolidate the status quo as a fait accompli, thereby removing all substance and meaning from the upcoming, decisive negotiations. In the most optimistic of interpretations, such support can only be viewed as an obvious attempt to improve the negotiating cards held by Israel with the aim of using them during the final status negotiations. In any case, Egypt believes that the continuation of Israeli settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory can only have a destructive impact on the peace process as a whole. It will be almost impossible to talk about establishing real peace in the Middle East under such conditions.

East Jerusalem is occupied territory. This is an established fact under international legitimacy, and it has been declared as such by all relevant United Nations resolutions, in particular Security Council resolutions 465 (1980) and 478 (1980), the resolutions of the General Assembly and the relevant provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Egypt follows with the greatest concern the illegal Israeli measures aimed at altering the status of Jerusalem, in particular those measures that support and condone expansionist settlement activities in East Jerusalem and its vicinity and that are feverishly aimed at consolidating the illegal annexation of the city by Israel. Egypt will continue to reaffirm the Palestinian right to occupied East Jerusalem notwithstanding our acknowledgement that the issue of Jerusalem is part of the final status negotiations.

The question of Palestinian refugees, the oldest extant refugee question in the world, is also among the issues that will be dealt with in the final status negotiations. For the first time in 50 years, this question, which has weighed so heavily on the conscience of the international community since 1948, is close to a possible solution. The solution I am referring to here is one based on justice, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and subsequent resolutions providing for the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and to receive compensation if they choose not to do so. Egypt warns of the consequences of ignoring the resolutions of international legitimacy on this grave humanitarian issue.

Egypt is working seriously and diligently towards the achievement of a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement of the question of Palestine. That settlement is the key to the establishment of peace in the Middle East. Without it, the region will remain on the brink of instability and tension. We hope that Israel will demonstrate not only similar seriousness in working to achieve peace in the region, but also the ability to negotiate in good faith by enhancing mutual confidence with the Palestinian side on the basis of equality and not of occupying land by force or imposing a fait accompli. Finally, we hope that Israel would also be able to take decisions that would help achieve a just peace and restore to the Palestinian people their inalienable rights after all the sufferings they have endured — sufferings that we all hope will soon come to an end.

Egypt is deeply convinced that the year 2000 will witness before we enter into the third millennium the establishment of the independent Palestinian state for which the Palestinian people have struggled for so long.

That state will be active and peace-loving; will maintain relations of good-neighbourliness and cooperation with all its neighbours; will constitute a significant, positive and long-awaited addition to our region; and will contribute maturely to, and play an important role in, shaping our region's new future. That future will be based on cooperation for development, and prosperity, and will enable this region, home to the three monotheistic religions, to play again an active role in the international arena politically, economically and socially.

Mr. Mesdoua (Algeria) (*spoke in Arabic*): The United Nations commemorated this morning the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, at which all speakers, whether representatives of organizations or major political bodies, recognized the need for the international community to continue to be involved in this issue in order to reach a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement.

More than half a century after the adoption of General Assembly resolution 181 (II), which expressly recognized the right of the Palestinian people to establish an independent state on its national territory, like all other peoples in the world, the Palestinians are still the victims of injustice, living in conditions of occupation, oppression and humiliation while important political developments have taken place in the world resulting in the elimination of colonization and in a recognition of the right of peoples to self-determination.

The situation in the Middle East in general, and in Palestine in particular, gives rise to concern due to the slow pace of the peace process in the region. After years of standstill under the rightist Government in Israel, which led to an effective freezing of the peace process and the end of any attempt to make it advance, it is logical to have some hope after the Labor Government has assumed power in Israel.

The situation slowly began to become more normal, though there were difficulties. What we are currently asking of the Israeli Government is that it respect the letter and spirit of the agreements concluded and the commitments made with the Palestinian Authority, including the Wye River Memorandum.

Algeria reaffirms its unreserved and unconditional support for the struggle of the Palestinian people to recover their usurped rights and their right to live in peace and security in their land, under the flag of their independent state.

Algeria continues to support the peace process in the Middle East and is convinced that this is the best way to settle this complex problem, which has been the source of many tragedies, wars and destruction, with a view to realizing the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to ending occupation in all its forms and manifestations, in accordance with international legality and internationally binding resolutions.

Algeria believes that the sole way for settling the problem in the Middle East and the core question of Palestine lies in the recognition of the national and legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, primarily their right to an independent state on their land, with the Holy City of Jerusalem as its capital.

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has often said that Algeria will fully support any sincere initiative to settle the Middle East question and the problem of Palestine in a just, lasting and comprehensive way. Algeria gives its full support to any initiative aimed at achieving that objective.

However, Algeria is not prepared to support efforts that are not serious and whose aim is to find a pretext to delay and manipulate matters, or any effort not aimed at attaining this objective. The just question of Palestine has the full and absolute support of all African countries. The 35th African Summit meeting of the Organization of African Unity, held in Algiers last July, was yet another occasion for African leaders to reaffirm their total support for the heroic struggle of the Palestinian people to regain their national inalienable rights. During that summit, Chairman Arafat enjoyed a warm fraternal welcome from all the heads of State or Government who participated in this summit.

This shows support for the struggle of the Palestinian people. That principled approach is traditional for Africans, who support the struggle of all peoples for self-determination on the basis of their own experience of long and bitter struggle against occupation, colonization, foreign hegemony and racial discrimination. The African leaders reaffirm the right of the Palestinian people, under the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), to exercise their national and inalienable rights, including the right to return to their country and recover their land and the right to self-determination and to the creation of an independent State on their national soil with East Jerusalem as its capital, in conformity with United Nations resolutions and international legitimacy.

The celebration at the United Nations of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People is of great importance to the international community. It proves once more the commitment and persistence of the international community in supporting the just struggle of the Palestinian people and in providing such support until it achieves its objective: the declaration of an independent Palestinian State.

Important developments took place last year, as demonstrated by the adoption by the General Assembly of a resolution aimed at raising the status of the Palestinian delegation, which was an important step in the recognition by the United Nations and other countries of the world of the equality of representation of Palestine with other countries. Furthermore, the holding in July of the Conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention provided an opportunity for the international community to reaffirm its support for this unarmed Arab people, who have been faced with repeated provocative and aggressive attacks, campaigns of displacement, land appropriation and the continuing and illegal colonization of its territory by the occupying Israeli forces. The Palestinian people have placed all their hopes in the international community for the protection and recognition of their legitimate rights. Today, they ask the international community to play a more effective role in the future so that internationally binding resolutions can be implemented.

As we approach the third millennium, we call on the United Nations to play more than ever before its role as the international Organization responsible for maintaining international peace and security in the most effective way possible.

Mr. Hachani (Tunisia) (*spoke in Arabic*): Once again, the General Assembly is taking up the question of Palestine, as it has done in previous years. Since the convening of the fifty-third session of the General Assembly, certain developments have taken place with regard to this central issue, among which we would like to highlight the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum on 4 September 1999 by the Israeli and Palestinian sides. That Memorandum deals specifically with the question of the timetable for the implementation of the commitments provided for by the agreements concluded and with the resumption of final status negotiations. Furthermore, last September, the two sides initiated those negotiations.

However, despite such developments, as indicated in the report of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, the situation on the ground is still worrying because of the continued policy pursued by the occupying Israeli authorities of creating new facts on the ground.

Furthermore, last year, illegal Israeli actions continued in occupied Jerusalem and in the remaining occupied Palestinian territories, especially the establishment and expansion of settlements. That prompted the General Assembly to recommend the convening of a Conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention. That Conference, which, as the Assembly knows, was convened in Geneva on 15 July 1999, issued a statement that affirmed the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem.

With the dawning of the new millennium and the new prospects that it carries, the reality of the situation in the Palestinian territories and in the Middle East region in general, which has remained the same for several decades, requires that the international community intensify and accelerate its efforts to exploit the opportunity that is available now to help establish the desired peace in the Middle East — a comprehensive, just and durable peace which will guarantee for the Palestinian people the achievement of their inalienable, legitimate national rights, foremost among which is the right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent State on their territory, with its capital in Al-Quds al-Sharif. Such a peace would also guarantee the end of Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights and southern Lebanon and enable all peoples and nations in the region to live in peace and security and to devote themselves to building a better future.

The attention of the international community, as represented by the General Assembly, is once again focused on Israel. Establishing peace in the Middle East requires Israel to respect the commitments it has undertaken in the context of agreements concluded with the Palestinian side, which has fulfilled all its obligations. It also requires Israel to abide by the principles that have formed the basis of the Middle East peace process and to respect international legitimacy and relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions. Israel must also respect the timetable agreed upon with the Palestinian side in the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum as it relates to the final status negotiations. Israel is also called upon to return to the negotiating table in the context of the Syrian and Lebanese tracks and to

withdraw from the Syrian Golan and from southern Lebanon in accordance with the requirements of the relevant United Nations resolutions.

In a letter addressed to the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People on the occasion of the commemoration of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, His Excellency President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, President of the Republic of Tunisia, stated:

> "Proceeding from its firm position of principle in support of the question of Palestine and its effective stand at the side of the Palestinian people, Tunisia once again calls on the international community to intensify its efforts and move quickly in order to secure favourable conditions and make available the means of making progress in and achieving success for the Middle East peace process so as to guarantee respect by Israel of its international commitments and adherence to the framework that has formed the basis of the peace process since its inception, especially the principle of land for peace, commitment to international legitimacy and the implementation of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978) and relevant General Assembly resolutions."

The international community, foremost among which is the United Nations, will remain responsible for the question of Palestine until a satisfactory settlement has been achieved based on United Nations and internationally binding resolutions, ensuring the full realization by the Palestinian people of their legitimate rights, including the establishment of a Palestinian State and a just resolution of the refugee question, in conformity with General Assembly resolution 194 (III).

In this critical phase of the Palestinian question — the beginning of permanent-status negotiations by the two sides — the role of the United Nations has become more important. In that connection, Tunisia notes with satisfaction the recent appointment by Mr. Kofi Annan of a Special Representative to the Multilateral Negotiations on the Middle East Peace Talks and Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories. Moreover, the sponsors of the peace process must spare no effort to move the process forward and to protect it from any stumbling blocks or other dangers until peace is achieved in the region.

The success of the peace process is linked also to efforts by all other international parties able in one way or another to play a role in promoting the process. In that connection, we note the effective role played by assistance to the Palestinian people in laying the basis for a sound Palestinian economy and society, which will be the nucleus of stability for the anticipated Palestinian State. We appeal to international donors to increase their assistance to the Palestinian Authority in all spheres; such assistance undoubtedly constitutes major support for the peace endeavours.

We wish also to stress how important it is that international support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) be intensified to enable it to continue its role pending the achievement of a comprehensive solution to the refugee problem in conformity with the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly.

In conclusion, I wish to commend the noble work carried out by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People under the active and judicious chairmanship of Ambassador Ibra Deguène Ka, in promoting the genuine realization by the Palestinian people of its rights. That work should continue until there is a final solution to the question of Palestine.

Mr. Shen Guofang (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): The new millennium is dawning. At this juncture, when the world is drawing up plans for the new era, we are all the more concerned over the future and the destiny of the Palestinian people, who have long been deprived of a home. But we are heartened to see that, thanks to concerted efforts by various relevant parties in the international community, major progress has been made in the Middle East peace process. The Palestinian people now finally have a self-rule government on their own territory, and are thus one important step closer towards regaining their legitimate national rights and establishing an independent State of Palestine.

Last September, Palestine and Israel reached an understanding on the implementation of the Wye River accord and on negotiations on the final status of Palestine, and signed the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum, thus removing the obstacles in the way of implementing the Wye River accord. Resuming the permanent-status talks and the opening of safe passages in the Palestinian autonomous area are yet another achievement by Palestine and by Israel after serious negotiations. We welcome such development and hope that the parties concerned will continue this flexible and pragmatic

attitude, implement earnestly their various agreements and understandings, overcome the various distractions and advance the peace process on the basis of relevant United Nations resolutions and the principle of land for peace so as to bring about an early and comprehensive settlement to the Arab-Israeli disputes, including the question of Palestine.

For reasons known to all, even after gaining self-rule, the Palestinian autonomous area is still facing tremendous difficulties in developing its economy, and the livelihood of the Palestinian people is in great need of improvement. We consider that helping the autonomous area in pursuing economic development will enable the Palestinian people quickly to enjoy the benefits of peace and will thus boost their faith in the peace talks. The international community is duty-bound to provide whatever support and assistance it can to the Palestinian people. Developed countries in particular should shoulder greater responsibility in this connection.

As the largest and most authoritative intergovernmental international organization on the world stage today, the United Nations should play a more active and effective role in resolving regional conflicts and safeguarding world peace. We highly appreciate the efforts and contributions of the United Nations in promoting over the years a settlement of the Middle East issue, with the question of Palestine at its core. We support and hope to see an even greater United Nations role in promoting the Middle East peace process and a final settlement of the question of Palestine and other issues in the Middle East.

The Chinese Government and the Chinese people have always devoted great attention to the question of Palestine. For decades, we have lent staunch support to the just cause of the Palestinian people, provided assistance to the Palestinian people to the best of our capacity through multilateral and bilateral channels. We have made untiring efforts and contributions in advancing the Middle East peace process. We are of the view that the question of Palestine is at the core of the Middle East question. Only when the question of Palestine is resolved and all the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people, including the right to an independent State, are restored can the Middle East enjoy real and lasting peace. The Chinese Government will, as always, work with the international community to continue to strive for a just and reasonable settlement of the question of Palestine.

Ms. Al-Nadari (Yemen) (*spoke in Arabic*): The question of Palestine has been one of the most important items on the agenda of the General Assembly since its twenty-ninth session, held in 1974. At that historic session, the Assembly invited the Palestine Liberation Organization, the representative of the Palestinian people, to participate in its deliberations on the question of Palestine in plenary meeting. Also at that session, the General Assembly once again reaffirmed the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and stressed that the achievement of those rights was indispensable for the resolution of the question of Palestine.

A quarter of a century later, the question of Palestine continues to be one of the major issues awaiting a just, lasting, comprehensive and final solution so that peace can prevail in the Middle East. The achievement of such a peace has become an international and regional humanitarian demand so that a new page can be turned in the lives and relationships of the peoples of the region, closing the chapter of past tragedies and abandoning past hatreds. It would provide fresh and vast opportunities for tolerance among various cultures, religions and ethnicities.

In this regard, my delegation expresses its satisfaction at the General Assembly's adoption by consensus a few days ago of the resolution on Bethlehem 2000. My delegation believes that the success of the millennium celebrations will constitute a new turning point on the road to the achievement of peace and tolerance and a further step towards a future in which the peoples of the Middle East region will enjoy peace, security and stability.

When the peace process started, it was welcomed by the peoples of the region. There were some successes on the Palestinian-Israeli track in the agreements signed by the two parties, the latest of which was the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum of 4 September 1999. This Memorandum is a good step towards revitalizing the peace process and ensuring its continuity. It is our hope that this peace process will proceed without further hinderance so that the Palestinian people can restore their inalienable rights, including their right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent State on their national soil with Al-Quds al-Sharif (Jerusalem) as its capital.

In this regard, it must be reaffirmed that any just and comprehensive settlement on the Palestinian track must take into account the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and their lands in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The release of

Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons must also be taken into account.

Israeli practices against the Palestinian people in the occupied territories are a cause of major concern. The illegal construction of settlements, expansion of existing ones, the demolition of homes, expropriation of land and the alternation of the demographic character of the territories and in particular of Al Quds al-Sharif, the campaigns of detention, torture and collective punishment — all these constitute a huge obstacle in the path of the peace process. The international community yearns to see its desired objectives achieved soon.

Israel must realize that the establishment of an independent Palestinian State will be a major factor in the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. In this regard, we call upon the Israeli Government to continue to implement the agreements and commitments made in the peace negotiations since the convening of the Peace Conference in Madrid, which reiterated the principle of land for peace. The Arab States that signed peace treaties with Israel have demonstrated the absolute wish of the Arabs to establish peace in the region and that they consider peace an irreversible strategic choice. They continue to fulfil their commitments under these treaties with a view to the establishment of a developed, safe, peaceful and secure Middle East.

The Republic of Yemen has supported the efforts for a peaceful settlement in the Middle East. My country reaffirms its principled position that just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East must be based, first and foremost, on the restoration of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, particularly their right to self-determination and the establishment of their independent State with Al-Quds as its capital. It also must be based on the withdrawal of Israel from southern Lebanon and the Syrian Golan. We look forward to the day when the flags of peace will fly over the Middle East so that the States of the region can live in peace and security.

The meeting rose at 6 p.m.